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Accurate Warning

In trying to assess the McNamara Report hastily —aside from suffering a bad case of intellectual excess—one is impressed not the least by the generally high quality of the advice given by the intelligence community.

The voluminous report—just the part that has been published in newspapers—provides a fascinating, and sometimes shocking, insight into the process by which the United States became enmeshed in the jungle of an unwinnable Indochina war. But of all the branches of the government that had a share in the decisions on Vietnam, the intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA, come out looking the best.

The intelligence people warned—and accurately —that neither the South Vietnamese government nor the American forces could overcome the appeal of the Viet Cong to the South Vietnamese people. They warned—and accurately—of the ineffectiveness of aerial bombing. They suggested the inconclusiveness of introducing large numbers of American ground troops into the fighting in South Vietnam. After more bomb tonnage had been dropped on North Vietnam than had been dropped in World War II and after half a million American troops had been deployed in South Vietnam, the enemy remained undefeated and victory remained as elusive as it had been for 15 years.

To be sure, the CIA cannot claim 100 per cent commendation. In mid-1965 John A. McCone, head of the CIA, warned that the use of U.S. combat troops would be ineffective unless the aerial bombing campaign, already under way, was subject to "minimum restraint." That sounds suspiciously like the later exhortation of Gen. Curtis LeMay to bomb the North Vietnamese "back to the stone age."

But in general, the estimates of the CIA and other intelligence agencies seem to have gauged accurately the mood of the Vietnamese people, the staying power of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, and the limitations of American military might when separated from the democratic ideals that had in the past motivated American intervention abroad.

If American power and ideals became separated, a large part of the reason was the failure of the highest officials in our government to inform the people or even Congress fully about both the conditions that existed in Vietnam and the real purposes for expanding the war. The McNamara Report is not a complete record of the entanglement process, but it is record enough to show the folly of presidential decisions that ignored the best intelligence and the arrogance of presidential war-making without the full participation of Congress.

Many Americans—probably a majority—failed to get aroused about Vietnam when the Johnson administration was making the fateful commitment of American combat troops because, like the officials at the top, they believed the tiny enemy could not stand for long against the overwhelming might of American troops and planes. The argument has frequently been used that these officials had little more information than the general public for the crucial decisions. But the McNamara Report indicates that they did have considerably more—and quite specific —information, much of it negative in its implications. Those who trusted the highest officials to know what they were doing were sadly mistaken. A full-dress congressional debate might have avoided the pitfall into which the country stumbled, particularly if the intelligence estimates had been more widely available.

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